A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO EUGENE O'NEILL'S PLAYS

Laura Alexandra Petrea (Şopterean)
PhD Student, University of Pharmacy, Science and Tehnology of Tîrgu-Mureş

Abstract:The present paper deals with Eugene O'Neill's plays and the Greek Mythology, who has a big influence over them. In O'Neill's writings, there are a lot of biographical elements which determined him to write plays, and at the same time, his life makes him read a lot of information and Greek tragedy. The writer's life events which have influenced him, and then the specific terms are defined and presented. These two important aspect are found in Eugene O'Neill's plays, and in the light of these, I can analyze the plays.

Keywords:O'Neill, Myths, tragedy, plays, life

When we hear Eugene O'Neill's name, we think about the American nation's major playwright. He was born in October 16th, 1888 and died on November 27th, 1953. His parents had a major role in his writings because his father was "an actor who made a fortune playing the lead role in a dramatization of Alexander Dumas's swashbuckling novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*" (Baym 1607) and his mother was in the backstage with her husband. He spent the first years of his life in tours and theatre with his parents.

> During O'Neill's childhood, his parents toured for part of every year, lived in New York City hotels for another part, and spent summers at their home in New London, Connecticut. O'Neill went to good preparatory schools and started college at Princeton in 1906. (Baym 1608)

From his father, he received the experience regarding the scene and the backstage, and from his mother, who was supporting her husband, he received the spiritual part of his personality. She was also an artist; she used to play the piano very good.

In 1912 Eugene O'Neill decided to write plays after he suffered from tuberculosis and was almost to die. While he was in a sanatorium in Connecticut, he started the play *The straw* where he explains his feelings from that time. Although he stayed there for only five months, that time was very useful not only for his health but also for his life as a play-writer. In 1913 Eugene O'Neill had already published five one-act plays named *A Wife for a Life*, *The Web*, *Thirst*, *Recklessness*, and *Warnings*. "He joined a new experimental theatre group called the Provincetown Players" (Baym 1608), and there he had some friends who helped him. In the summer the members of that theatre were staging plays on a wharf in Massachusetts, and the rest of the year they were using a small theatre in the Village. In the summer of 1917, they played for the first time the one-act play called *Thirst*.

> O'Neill spent several years at sea, during which he suffered from depression and alcoholism. Despite this, he had a deep love for the sea, and it became a prominent theme in many of his plays, several of which are set on board ships like those on which he worked. (Murfin)

Like Baym mentioned, during 1913-1914 Eugene O'Neill wrote nine plays, 1916-1917 six plays and in 1918 four plays. The staging of the plays made him famous and

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financially successful. These early plays are realistic and are based on his experiences from the sea while he worked at Westinghouse Electric Company. (1608) Also, in 1914 he becomes a Harvard student, near Massachusetts, where he studies theatre and at the same time meets the professor George Baker (Comarnescu, 36), who influences him a lot although after a year he left and did not complete the course about dramatic technique.

Eugene O'Neill read a lot, and this thing can be noticed very fast in his plays because they are original and very complex. Comarnescu mentions some names which were very important for O'Neill development like Edgar Lee Masters, Whitman, Nietzsche, Strindberg, Wedekind, and so on (37). O'Neill read everything he found, no matter if the authors were Greeks, Elizabethans, Classics or Moderns, and at the same time the professor, Baker, encouraged him. Baker had an important role in a writer's life because he understood him, and that was very useful for a genius (Comarnescu, 100).

In 1920 he won the first Pulitzer Prize for Drama with *Beyond the Horizon*, then another three prizes were won in 1922 with one of his best-known plays named *Anna Christie*, in 1928 with *Desire Under the Elms* and in 1957 *Strange Interlude*. Another important year in Eugene O'Neill career was 1936 when he won the Nobel Prize in Literature after he was nominated by Henrik Schuck, who was a member of Swedish Academy (Murfin).

In an article from the Internet named *The Sailor Who Became "America's Shakespeare"* and written by Muffin is mentioned the fact that at the beginning of his writing, the characteristic of Eugene O'Neill's plays is realism, the major theme is the sea and at the maturity the plays become a part of the modernism and at the same time the writer revives the classical heroic mask from ancient Greek theatre and Japanese Noh theatre.

Literary biography

On the one hand, his parents were the first ones who helped him to become a writer because they had a strong connection with the theatre and took him from an early age with them. His father's name is James O'Neill, and everybody knows him as an Irish immigrant actor. His mother's name is Ella Quinlan, and she is "the daughter of a successful Irish immigrant businessman in Cincinnati, hated backstage life and became addicted to morphine" (Baym 1608). When he found out that his mother was a morphine addict, he started drinking. He had an older brother named James Jr. who became an actor and at the same time an alcoholic.

Also, his father became an alcoholic, and that is why O'Neill had such a complicated life at the youth. All his family was addicted to alcohol or morphine, and they died soon when he was only thirty years old. He lost his father in 1920, then his mother in 1921 and his brother in 1923. These deaths and shocks made "O'Neill became interested in dramatizing the complicated pattern of his family life [and started writing very complex and original plays] focus on the family, rather than the person" (Baym 1608).

He found inspiration and confirmation for this approach in classical Greek drama, which had always centered on families. His 1931 *Mourning Becomes Electra,* based on the *Oresteia* cycle of the classical Greek playwright Aeschylus, situated the ancient story of family murder and divine retribution in Civil War America with great success. (Baym 1609)

On the other hand, his family life as a husband and a father provoked him disappointments and drama. He was married three times; the first marriage was with Kathleen Jenkins and lasted from 1909 until 1912 and they had a son in 1910 named Eugene O'Neill Jr.; the second marriage was with Agnes Boulton between 1918-1929 and they had two

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children named Shane O'Neill (born in 1919) and Oona O'Neill (born in 1925); the third marriage took place in 1929, and the wife's name is Carlotta Monterey (Comarnescu, 25-27). The last marriage seemed to be the best because his wife helped him to organize his life and let him devote to writing but Monterey "became addicted to potassium bromide and the marriage deteriorated, resulting in several separations, although they never divorced" (Murfin).

Eugene O'Neill's relationship with his children is very distant. He disowned Oona because she married Charlie Chaplin when she was only eighteen and he was too old for her, fifty-four. That is the reason why they never saw again. Eugene Jr. suffered from alcoholism and Shane became a heroin addict. Both of them committed suicide. O'Neill lived only when Eugene Jr. committed, in 1950 and Shane died in 1977.

In conclusion, life was very difficult for the writer, and his plays from maturity are connected to this family drama, the difference of age, suicide, murders, and so on. In my opinion, family life is the one who plays a major role in the writings, and he connected it with Greek myths and symbols.

Eugene O'Neill's Plays

A play is a piece of literature which is written by a playwright; in this case, the playwright is Eugene O'Neill, which can be played on the stage. In the free dictionary are a lot of definitions and characteristic when we search the word *play*. In our case, the plays refer to the written part, and they are or are not divided into acts. An act is like a chapter, and a short play may have only one act. There are many acts which can be subdivided into scenes. (The Free Dictionary)

During his life, Eugene O'Neill wrote one-act plays at the beginning of his career as an author like: *A wife for a Life* (1913), *The Web* (1913), *Thirst* (1913), *Recklessness* (1913), *Warnings* (1913), *Fog* (1914), *Abortion* (1914), *Bound East for Cardiff* (1914), *The Movie Man: A comedy* (1914), *The Sniper* (1915), *Before Breakfast* (1916) *In the zone* (1917), *Ile* (1917), *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), *Moon of the Caraibbees* (1918), *The Rope* (1918), *Shell Shock* (1918), *The Dreamy Kid* (1918), *Where the Cross is Made* (1918), *Exorcism* (1919), *Hughie* (1941). As we can notice, all of them (except one) are written in the young age of his career. In the period when he wrote them, the drama was still no present in his life because as I mentioned in the last subchapter only in 1920 started to lose his family. From all of this plays, O'Neill kept in his official editions only nine of them (seven of them having as the main theme the sea and two of them in another atmosphere). These plays can be found in *The plays of Eugene O'Neill* published in 1934 by Random House.

The most complex plays are full-length plays like: *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), *The Straw* (1919), *Anna Christie* (1920), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *Diff'rent* (1921), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Lazarus Laughed* (1925), *The Great God Brown* (1926), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941)and many others.

In general, in O'Neill's plays, the people are not sweet, although some of them have noble feelings and they are oppressed by destiny. The language is mixed because the characters belong to different social classes and nationalities. That's why some of them are very hard to understand in the first reading. An example is *Desire Under the Elms* where the characters are farmers and people from the country, and they speak in slangs, and their English is hard to understand. The American playwright tried to spiritualize the life through a lot of methods and styles like naturalism, realism, expressionism, and later neo-classicism. In this way, he could give to life a deep knowledge, more significant, and questioning.

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(Comarnescu, 65) The biography of the author is found in the plays and also a lot of events which took place in his life, during the years affected the writing.

In the article named *An Attempt at Unmasking, Eugene O'Neill* is a very interesting point of view about O'Neill's plays. "Masks appear in several of Eugene O'Neill's early plays, serving not as a mere technical innovation, but rather as a way to explore "hidden conflicts" of human nature."(Dimitrijevic) In my opinion, the masks appear not only in the early plays. They are also present in the other plays. Dimitrijevic also speaks in that article about the three influences in the plays.

> First is the influence of Greek tragedy – itself a domain of the "masked God" – which O'Neill tried to restore through several of his plays. Second is O'Neill's insight into the connection between modern man's selfhood and the process of masking, several decades before psychoanalysts have approached it scientifically, in complete accordance with Kohut's hypothesis about the "anticipatory function of art." The final factor consists of both his early development and his later life – especially his three marriages – as revealed through extensive biographies, correspondence, and plays. (Dimitrijevic)

Nowadays the word *theatre* is a common term, but its origin is in ancient Greece. In that period poets such as Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristophanes wrote plays which were played on the stage. There were three types of play for the beginning: the first one was a tragedy, the second one was a comedy, and the last one was satirical. There is also a big difference between the ancient theatre and the theatre of today. Today it is just for entertainment, and it represents culture but in the past was a cult addressed to the god Dionysos. In Greek Mythology, Dionysus was the god of wine and fertility, and he played a very important role in Greek history.

> The Theatre of Dionysus is a major theatre in Athens, considered to be the world's first theatre, built at the foot of the Athenian Acropolis. Dedicated to Dionysus, the god of plays and wine (among other things), the theatre could seat as many as 17,000 people with excellent acoustics, making it an ideal location for ancient Athens' biggest theatrical celebration, the Dionysia. (Montgomery 243)

Although theatre masks have not survived until nowadays, "we only know what they looked like because the theatre was so popular in Greek and Roman times that models of actors and masks were made in other materials such as terracotta, stone, and bronze and depicted on gems and in paintings and mosaics" (Montgomery 244). In tragedy, the things were a little different because the features were set in serious and suffering.

Which is the use of the masks? Masks were worn because people could see the character from a distance without asking who is it, both men and women could wear them and be any character they want. Also, they changed voice because they covered the mouth, a person could play many roles in the same play because nobody could notice that and another reason is that under the mask any ordinary person became a mythological hero or everything.

O'Neill explained why the use of masks could be a solution "of the modern dramatist's problem as to how – with the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means – he can express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probing of psychology continue to disclose to us" (3).

Dimitrijevic says that O'Neill truly respects Greek theatre and there the mask has a very important role, a purpose which can be very practical. Greek theatres were very big compared to the ones from today, and the mask had the role to help the spectators to discern the characters (164).

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> It is generally accepted that tragedy in ancient Greece developed out of Dionysian cults and that it remained under their influence for a long period. Even though this diety was for centuries worshiped in various communities, the real tragic theatre was born in Athens, under the wings of Dionysus as the "masked God." (Dimitrijevic)

Although Dionysus was absent, he was replaced and at the same time represented by a mask. "Serving as an instrument for transgressing the boundaries, the mask shows that a being who is seemingly remote is being placed in this world "(Kerenyi 158). Also, Kerenyi says that this thing can be done only by using the masks (158). I think that through it, people imagined the face of their god, and there was a boundary between the real god and the image of him, who was an illusion. In this way, the tragedy had a new element called fiction.

While writing the plays, Eugene O'Neill wanted to get back into Ancient Greece and at the same time to make it contemporary.

> Therefore, while preparing *Mourning becomes Electra*, he wondered whether it is possible to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into such a play which would be accepted by modern audiences and concluded that modern audiences have no general religious basis, no common fund tradition to which they may refer the greatest problems with which we are all concerned. (Dimitrijevic)

The Quest for Greek Tragedy

Tragedy term is used in literature when critics speak about a drama which presents a serious story about people who suffer a lot and live awful events such as murders, crimes, deaths and so on. What about Greek Tragedy? As I mentioned before, Greek Tragedy exists for a very long period, and it has connections with the Ancient plays which were performed at festivals in Greece. There are many definitions assigned to this term, and all of them have as origin the Greek theatre. The subject of the theatre or well said also Greek tragedy comes from Homer's Iliad and Odyssey because they have mythological heroes from history and religion.

Aristotle wrote in his poetry about the Tragedy as being an imitation of an action which is composed of three parts (introduction, middle, and ending). It also says that it is performed on the stage by some actors, and it has the role of purification. Nowadays we call it *catharsis*, and through it, we can free and release our emotions, negative thoughts, tension and have better feelings.

Blume made some generalizations about the Greek tragedy and helped me to understand better the common base of them.

> Some generalizations can be made about Greek tragedy. First of all, almost all of them are based on myths familiar to the contemporary audience. This allowed the tragedians to minimize more expository material and devote the play to a particular purpose or idea. Secondly, all Greek tragedies used a chorus. However, the extent and function of the chorus varies with each tragedian and indeed with each tragedy. (Blume 1)

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Also, in Blume thesis, there are three major tragedies explained to understand better O'Neill's inspiration from Greek tragedy. The tragedies which Blume mentioned are Aeschylus' Oresteia, Sophocles' Oedipus and Euripides' Hippolytus.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle mentioned the fact that the plot or the action of the tragedy is the most important thing because the characters are presented and well-known from the beginning.

Eugene O'Neill's the most productive period is around 1920s because in this time he explores a lot of aspects belonging to Greek tragedy. When I mentioned aspects, I thought about things which have a connection with family, drama, religious, psychological, formal, etc. The tragedies which O'Neill wrote in this period are also connected to modern tragic themes because he was contemporary with them.

As Lambropolus mentions in his article entitled *Eugene O'Neill's Quest for Greek Tragedy*, there is an imaginative combination of Hippolytus, Oedipus, and Medea who are transposed into the 1920s in the New England, in the play entitled *Desire under the Elms.* That play was a success, and the writer pays attention to Greek tragedy. From there is resulted in *The Great God Brown* in 1926, after only two years since the last play. This play is not so very known over the world, although it contains elements from modern tragedy, and it is written theatrically.

> Specifically, through elaborate use of masks, O'Neill presents agonistic doubling (friends as brothers and rivals) as the basic structure of contemporary tragedy. In it, the suffering of Dionysus is not the individuation of the will, as Nietzsche had argued, but the duality of identity. But without individuation is rebellion possible? (Lambropoulos)

O'Neill read Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and maybe that had an impact over his work. That is why *The Great God Brown* is another tragedy with the hero Dionysus.

> The tradition is undisputed that Greek tragedy in its earliest form had for its sole theme the sufferings of Dionysus and that for a long time the only stage hero was Dionysus himself. But it may be claimed with equal confidence that until Euripides, Dionysus never ceased to be the tragic hero; that all the celebrated figures or the Greek stage – Prometheus, Oedipus, etc. – are mere masks of this original hero, Dionysus. (Nietzsche 73)

Eugene O'Neill's play narrates the story of two friends who wanted to succeed in life. One of them is called Dion Anthony, and he is an untalented painter, and the other one is called William Brown, and he is a successful businessman and architect. Dion dies because he is an alcoholic, and Brown takes his mask and his wife. He dies too, accidentally, killed by the police. Both of them fight for Margaret's and Cybel's love, and Dion was the first who won it and after that, Brown. This tragedy represents the dual nature of the god, and the entire play has the doubling of being. The friends are like brothers, but at the same time rivals, they want the same woman and then prostitute, they have the same life views and the same actions. This play is a rebellion written as I mentioned before, and this doubling reflects the two sides of Dionysus.

Almost at the end of the article, Lambropolous says that O'Neill achieves something like the post-Nietzschean tragedy in the play *The Great God Brown.* There the tragic becomes like a philosophy. After ten years, in *The American Drama since 1918* was introduced a chapter called "Tragedy: Eugene O'Neill" (11).

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